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Competitiveness versus demotivation in online learning: A phenomenological study among Indonesian University students

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Abstract

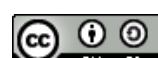
The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities worldwide to adopt Learning Management Systems (LMS) for remote instruction, raising concerns about student motivation and engagement in online environments. This qualitative phenomenological study explores university students' lived experiences using LMS and how this environment influenced their learning motivation. Seven undergraduate students from a public university in Indonesia were purposively selected. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and document review (LMS screenshots), then analyzed thematically. Two major themes emerged. Theme 1, Demotivation versus Competitiveness: Some students reported decreased responsibility and motivation, experiencing procrastination and boredom. Conversely, other students experienced increased competitive drive, setting personal task targets and enjoying the privacy of task completion. Theme 2, Flexibility: Students universally valued the temporal and spatial flexibility of LMS, although this required greater self-regulation. LMS-based online learning elicited contrasting student responses. While it enhanced competitiveness for some students, it reduced motivation for others. Active instructor engagement in fostering learner autonomy and providing support is essential to maximize LMS advantages without compromising student engagement. These findings highlight the need for balanced instructional design that combines technology affordances with meaningful human interaction.

Keywords: Online learning; Student motivation; Competitiveness; Learner autonomy; Learning Management System

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions worldwide to transition abruptly from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning. In Indonesia, universities were instructed by the Ministry of Education to conduct remote teaching as a preventive measure during the pandemic (Tersta et al., 2023). This sudden shift required lecturers and students to rapidly adapt to digital platforms to maintain educational continuity. Learning Management Systems (LMS) quickly became the central infrastructure supporting online learning, enabling the distribution of course materials, submission of assignments, and virtual interaction between instructors and students. LMS platforms are designed to provide flexible access to learning resources anytime and anywhere, allowing instructional processes to



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continue even during large-scale disruptions.

Although LMS-based learning offers benefits such as flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for independent study, it also presents substantial challenges. Research from developing countries indicates that online learning often “cannot produce desired results” when students lack stable internet access, adequate devices, or sufficient digital readiness (Tersta et al., 2023). These obstacles are consistent with broader literature showing that learner readiness, self-discipline, and intrinsic motivation significantly influence success in online environments (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Without the structure of physical classroom settings, many students struggle with procrastination, lack of engagement, and feelings of isolation, situations that may diminish learning outcomes and satisfaction.

Within Indonesia, similar issues have been documented, with many students reporting that the abrupt transition to online learning resulted in reduced interaction, low motivation, and difficulty adapting to fully digital instructional environments (Anugrahana, 2020). At the same time, LMS adoption varies across institutions, and individual experiences differ widely based on students’ personal characteristics, technological readiness, and the quality of system implementation (Aina et al., 2023). Some students feel motivated by the flexibility offered by LMS-based learning and demonstrate high levels of competitiveness, whereas others experience stress, cognitive overload, or declining motivation. This duality reflects the complex psychological and contextual factors that shape online learning engagement.

Theoretical perspectives support these variations. According to Self-Determination Theory, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation influence students’ participation and achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). LMS design, user-friendliness, and the availability of learning resources can enhance or hinder intrinsic motivation. Social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of self-efficacy in shaping academic effort and persistence; students with higher confidence in their abilities tend to approach online learning challenges more productively (Lianto, 2019). Moreover, self-regulated learning is essential in digital environments where students must plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning independently (Hariri et al., 2021). Prior studies also highlight that interactive LMS features, such as quizzes, video-based learning, and gamification, can enhance engagement and even encourage healthy competition among learners (Nur et al., 2025; Paradise & Wibowo, 2021).

However, several studies also report barriers faced by students when using LMS. Issues such as complex interfaces, lack of technical support, monotonous materials, and minimal feedback from lecturers can reduce satisfaction and motivation (Sapitri & Budiningsih, 2025; Simanullang & Pakpahan, 2024). When LMS platforms do not adequately support interaction or provide engaging content, students may feel disconnected, overwhelmed, or emotionally fatigued. This aligns with prior findings showing that motivation tends to decline when students experience isolation or insufficient academic support within online learning systems (Alj & Bouayad, 2024; Dharma & Sudewiputri, 2021).

In the context of Indonesian universities, particularly within faculties such as the Faculty of Economics and Business at Universitas Negeri Surabaya (FEB UNESA), these dynamics are especially relevant. Students may experience LMS environments as either motivating, allowing flexibility, autonomy, and opportunities for competition, or demotivating due to technical problems, lack of guidance, or limited interaction. The phenomenological study by Tersta et al (2023), revealed a distinctive theme of “competitiveness versus unmotivated” among LMS users, illustrating the contrast between students who thrive in self-paced digital settings and those who become disengaged. Yet, a deep qualitative understanding of how students at FEB UNESA perceive and navigate these challenges remains limited.

Given these gaps, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of FEB UNESA students in using LMS, focusing on the contrasting responses between highly competitive learners and those who feel unmotivated. By integrating perspectives from motivation theory, self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, and digital learning design, this study seeks to uncover the factors that shape student engagement in LMS-based learning. The findings are expected to

provide meaningful insights for developing more effective, interactive, and supportive LMS environments that can enhance student motivation, reduce barriers, and optimize online learning outcomes.

METHODS

Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to deeply explore and describe students' experiences with using an LMS. Phenomenology was chosen because it aims to reveal the essence or essential meaning of a phenomenon by examining how it is perceived by those who have lived it (Creswell, 2014). In other words, phenomenological research focuses on individuals' lived experiences and the subjective meanings they ascribe to those experiences. By applying a phenomenological approach, we sought to understand how students make sense of learning via the LMS, including their feelings of motivation or lack thereof, rather than to measure predefined variables. This approach is well-suited for uncovering nuanced psychological and contextual factors that quantitative surveys might overlook. We drew on the tradition of descriptive phenomenology, bracketing our own preconceptions as researchers (epoché) and letting themes emerge from the data. Throughout data collection and analysis, the researchers engaged in reflexivity and "bracketing" to minimize bias, striving to capture the participants' perspectives as authentically as possible.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted at a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. Participants were seven undergraduate students (4 female, 3 male) from the Faculty of Education majoring in Language and Literature Education. Their ages ranged approximately from 19 to 22 years, and they were at different semester levels (from 2nd year to final year). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who had substantial experience using the university's LMS during the pandemic. All participants had completed at least two semesters of fully online coursework via the LMS. They were thus well-positioned to reflect on both the advantages and challenges of LMS-based learning. To ensure diversity of perspectives, the sample included students who had voiced varying attitudes toward online learning, some who were known to be enthusiastic about technology-enhanced learning, and others who had expressed difficulties in motivation. Each participant provided informed consent to partake in the study, with assurances of confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms or codes (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) in reporting.

During the pandemic, the LMS platform at this university functioned as the central hub for course delivery. It offered features such as content modules (lecture slides, videos), discussion forums, assignment upload portals with deadlines, attendance tracking, and links to live video sessions. Courses were conducted in a mix of asynchronous activities (self-paced study of materials, forum discussions) and synchronous sessions (live lectures or Zoom meetings at scheduled times) as needed. This context is important, as students' experiences would be influenced by how instructors utilized the LMS features (for example, whether they held regular live classes or relied mostly on uploaded materials). By the time of data collection, students had been using LMS for over a year and had experienced multiple courses in this fully online mode.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method was in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant, conducted in Indonesian via video call (due to ongoing social distancing policies). Phenomenological interviews were guided by open-ended questions prompting students to recount their experiences with the LMS and how it affected their learning behavior and motivation. Example prompts included: "Can you describe a typical day of learning using the LMS? How did you feel about completing coursework online?" and "Tell me about any challenges or advantages you experienced when studying via the LMS." Follow-up questions probed specific issues like time management, interaction with lecturers or peers online, feelings of

accountability, and comparisons with face-to-face learning. Each interview lasted about 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission.

In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with all seven participants together after the individual interviews. The FGD allowed participants to collectively reflect and compare their experiences, sometimes stimulating deeper insights. It was moderated by the researcher in an open conversational style, using guiding questions derived from preliminary interview findings. The FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes and provided an opportunity for participants to agree, debate, or expand on points raised by others (for instance, one student's comment about feeling unmotivated might trigger another to share a contrasting competitive attitude). This group dynamic enriched the data by highlighting commonalities and variations in experiences.

Supplementary document analysis was also performed on relevant artifacts. Participants were asked to share or screen-share any documents or screenshots illustrating their LMS usage (e.g. their LMS dashboard showing courses, a sample assignment submission page, discussion forum interactions, etc.). Some participants provided screenshots of their LMS interface and course announcements. Instructors' LMS postings (such as deadlines and forum prompts) were also examined when available. These documents provided context and helped triangulate what participants described. For example, a screenshot showing a long list of pending assignments corroborated a student's statement about feeling overwhelmed by LMS task notifications.

Data Analysis

All interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim in Indonesian. The analysis followed a qualitative thematic approach, combining within-case and cross-case analysis as described by [Miles & Huberman \(1994\)](#). Initially, each transcript was read closely (within-case analysis) to identify significant statements and preliminary codes related to the research question (e.g., codes such as "loss of discipline," "boredom," "peer competition," "flexible schedule," etc.). During this stage, the researchers noted any meaning units that captured aspects of the lived experience of LMS-based learning. Next, a cross-case analysis compared and aggregated codes across all participants to discern recurring patterns or themes. Conceptually similar codes were clustered into sub-themes, and overarching themes were then derived that best represented the essence of the students' experiences.

Two primary themes emerged from this iterative coding process, each encompassing multiple facets of the LMS learning experience. To enhance reliability, investigator triangulation was employed: two researchers independently coded portions of the data and then discussed discrepancies to reach consensus on the themes. The use of multiple data sources (interviews, FGD, documents) also facilitated triangulation of findings, improving the trustworthiness of interpretations. Key quotations from participants were translated into English for reporting, with care taken to preserve their original meaning and tone. (For transparency, the original Indonesian quotes are provided alongside the translations where appropriate.) The final themes were reviewed against the raw data to ensure they faithfully reflected the participants' voices and did not omit any significant counterexamples. Any divergent cases or unique experiences were noted in the reporting to avoid overgeneralization.

Overall, the methodological rigor, including prolonged engagement (through multiple interviews/FGD), triangulation, member-checking of summaries, and reflexive bracketing, aimed to ensure that the study's conclusions genuinely arose from the students' described experiences. The phenomenological emphasis on participants' perceptions and feelings is reflected in the results below, which integrate narrative quotes to illustrate each theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This research reveals that the use of Learning Management System (LMS) in the learning process has diverse impacts on student motivation and competitiveness. Through a

phenomenological approach and in-depth questioning with participants, it was found that LMS provides easy access to learning materials, time flexibility, and enhances independent learning. However, some students also expressed that the lack of direct interaction with instructors and peers can reduce their learning motivation.

Data visualization analysis using NVivo 12 Plus software revealed that students' perceptions and experiences with LMS are influenced by various factors such as system design, instructor role, and social-emotional support in the online learning process. The treemap visualization showed words such as "assignment," "material," "instructor," "learning," "motivation," and "competitive" as dominant elements in students' experiences. This indicates that students' learning experience is significantly influenced by the presence of assignments, the role of instructors, and motivation that emerges during the online learning process.

Specifically, student experiences were divided into two distinct patterns. For some students, LMS became a medium that opened space for independent learning, strengthened self-confidence, and enhanced competence. For example, participant D stated that LMS made it easier to review learning and revisit previous material whenever needed. Conversely, for most other participants, LMS use was considered burdensome and made the learning process feel monotonous. This was evident from statements by participants A and F who complained about slow server speeds, lack of direct interaction with instructors, and a learning atmosphere that felt cold and non-communicative. The word cloud in the analysis results showed many negative words such as "no," "lack," "bored," "confused," and "lazy."

These negative experiences were reinforced by participant G's statement, who felt a loss of enthusiasm due to the absence of communication with the instructor or classmates. Many students reported that they felt like they were learning alone, without direction or support from instructors or peers. The lack of discussion forums, absence of instructor feedback, and unclear explanations became reasons why the learning motivation of some students decreased. Several students also reported feeling mentally pressured, bored with the monotonous learning atmosphere, and unmotivated due to the absence of discussion space or social interaction while using LMS.

Discussion

These findings have significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding the role of LMS in online learning. The use of LMS that creates positive experiences is consistent with the perspective presented by [Fadholi et al \(2023\)](#), who state that although LMS facilitates material access, the quality of interaction and media management significantly affects student learning motivation. This indicates that LMS effectiveness does not solely rest on material availability or the technology itself, but rather on how the system is designed and implemented to support meaningful interaction.

The finding that some students experienced increased independence and confidence through LMS aligns with [Al-fraihat et al \(2017\)](#), who stated that LMS with user-friendly displays and quick feedback provision can increase student satisfaction and learning motivation. Research by [Trisnawati et al \(2017\)](#) further supports this finding, stating that students show high motivation in learning when teaching methods are adapted to their needs. This principle suggests that interactive and adaptive LMS, designed with user needs in consideration, has the potential to increase student engagement and motivation.

However, the negative impacts experienced by most students provide important insights into the limitations of technology-based learning approaches without effective human mediation. This finding aligns with [Singh & Thurman \(2019\)](#), who emphasize that online learning should not only focus on content but must also consider the emotional and social aspects to keep students motivated. The lack of social interaction and emotional support found in this research resulted in students experiencing emotional disconnection from the learning process, which subsequently decreased their motivation.

The crucial role of instructors in online learning is also confirmed in this research. [Khunaini](#)

& Sholikhah (2021) state that teaching style significantly influences student learning motivation, and LMS alone is insufficient to increase learning motivation without effective interaction between instructors and students. When instructors are not actively participating or providing feedback, students feel neglected and their motivation decreases significantly.

The emotional stress experienced by some students in this research can be explained through the concept of technostress. Rafsanjani et al (2023) emphasize that technostress experienced by students can affect their intention to continue using online learning, including LMS. When systems are slow, confusing, or difficult to use, combined with lack of social support, it creates conditions that trigger stress and sustained motivation decline.

These research findings confirm that student learning motivation when using LMS does not depend solely on the technology used, but is significantly influenced by how the system is designed and implemented within the context of human relationships. Faiza Rini & Purnama (2021) confirm that LMS will be more effective if combined with good teaching methods and learning approaches that consider student needs. Students who have internal motivation and receive active support from instructors are usually more able to manage their own learning and demonstrate high learning enthusiasm (Nuraeni & Irawati, 2022). Conversely, students who receive less guidance or do not feel supported often experience decreased enthusiasm, sometimes even wanting to switch programs or losing interest in their chosen field.

In-depth analysis of student experiences reveals that LMS used only for organizing materials or assignments is insufficient. Digital learning systems need to be designed to be more dynamic, support interaction between students and instructors, be user-friendly, and provide attractive learning experiences (Abaricia & Santos, 2023). LMS equipped with discussion features, smooth operation, and enabling instructors to respond quickly will be far more effective in increasing student motivation and learning outcomes (Andiarna & Kusumawati, 2020). Conversely, if LMS is slow, confusing, and lacks interaction, it will make students increasingly uninterested and feel burdened by the online learning process.

In other words, this research shows that the impact of LMS on learning motivation is not deterministic (always positive or always negative), but rather highly contextual and depends on implementation quality. For some students, LMS can foster learning enthusiasm and competitive attitudes when well-designed and supported by active instructors. However, for others, LMS can decrease learning enthusiasm if not used with appropriate approaches. Therefore, improvements to the LMS system are necessary to make it more humanistic, adaptive, and communicative. Instructors must also take a more active role, not just uploading materials, but also being present as guides who accompany students' learning process directly. Thus, technology and human mediation must work synergistically to create meaningful and motivating learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that FEB UNESA students have different experiences in using the Learning Management System (LMS). Some students feel that the LMS helps them to study more independently, manage their time flexibly, and feel more confident in their studies. The LMS also makes it easy to access materials anytime and anywhere, so for some students, this is an opportunity to increase their enthusiasm for learning and compete healthily with their friends. However, not all students feel the same way. Many also feel that the LMS is only a place to receive assignments without sufficient explanation. The lack of interaction with lecturers, the absence of clear feedback, and the monotonous system make them feel bored, confused, and even lose their enthusiasm for learning. The LMS, which is supposed to be a learning support medium, feels rigid and does not help emotionally or socially if it is not accompanied by active communication. This experience shows that technology alone is not enough to create a good learning process, because the success of learning also depends heavily on the role of lecturers and teaching methods that accompany students, not just giving assignments and then leaving them to their own devices.

Based on this, the researcher suggests that future LMS system development should not only focus on technical functions such as uploading materials or assignments, but the LMS should be designed to become a learning space that truly supports students, both academically and emotionally. Features such as discussion forums, direct feedback from lecturers, and two-way interaction are very important to add or maximize. Lecturers also need to be more actively involved, not only as task givers, but also as mentors who can provide guidance, answer questions, and motivate students during the learning process. For future research, it would be very useful to explore in more depth how LMS can be tailored to the different needs of students, for example based on their learning styles, mental conditions, or their level of comfort in online learning. Future research could also try to combine LMS with social media platforms or other collaboration applications to create a more enjoyable and active learning atmosphere and make students feel that they are part of the learning process, not just recipients of assignments.

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